What's Your Reaction?

Review of City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960’s and 70's. By Edmund White. Bloomsbury USA, 297 pages, $26.00

There are memoirs and there are memoirists. A close cousin to the autobiography, a memoir is customarily thought of in the singular: one per person. On the other hand, memoirists, the field's specialists, can make any part of their lives into an epoch worthy of a book. They are literary raconteurs, stand-up monologists, night club actors on the page.

This is the time, it seems, of the New York City gay memoirist. With City Boy, cultural critic and novelist Edmund White follows up on My Lives (2006) with a new memoir about life in New York City in the sixties and seventies. He's a more highbrow Augusten Burroughs; a more sedate and scholarly David Sedaris.

The book is an exquisitely written, devilishly detailed account of White's life in the City. The author has tales gaylore: he was a fly in the Stonewall; in leather at leather bars; cooked dinner for poets; attended after-parties for the New York Institute for the Humanities. He is a serial exaggerator, claiming that in the seventies "everyone wanted to be bisexual" and describing a friend "who read three or four books a day." Throughout, City Boy reveals an unabashedly ambitious artist coming to terms with free love and gay liberation. It could be called Gay Sex in the City.

When dealing with everybody who was anybody in his circle, White is, well, penetrating. His friends and lovers (and you do need a scorecard to keep track of them) include Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Susan Sontag. He brushes up against Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges; visits Venice with Peggy Guggenheim; gets drunk with James Merrill and John Ashberry; and he cruises the leather bars with Robert Mapplethorpe.

It is difficult, however, to characterize the characterizer. After overcoming his ambivalence about being gay, White continues to struggle with whether there is or should be something called gay literature. The conflict between genre and a universal world view is the meta-theme of his book. Now that gay literature has come and gone "as a commercial fad and a serious movement," he writes, it seems true that it "did isolate us - to our advantage initially, though ultimately to our disadvantage." And when gay people were "liberated," it "became easier in certain milieus to come out, but at the same time the stakes were higher....and only the highly motivated made it across the barbed-wire fence." At times, White confesses, he regrets "the invention of the category 'gay.'"

In City Boy, he remains ambivalent, using the very specificity of gay life to illuminate some transcendent truths and in so doing makes the whole work a sort of clever synecdoche. He struggles with what it means to want to be "among those five hundred people in America who earn a living, even a meager living, by writing serious literature." ("Having no longer any chance to be a prodigy," he tells us, "I now had to content myself with being a late bloomer,
if I was going to bloom at all.") And about the relationship, such as it, between friendship and love. "Love raises great expectations in us that it never satisfies," he writes. It is "source of anxiety until it is a source of boredom." While friendship "feeds the spit" with a permis de sejour that enables us to go anywhere and do anything exactly as our whims dictate.

Applying such considerations to his own relationships, White welcomes readers to his world with take-no-prisoners portraits. Consider, for example, his deconstruction of a dinner party at the home of Richard Sennett:

All these lonely intellectuals, their eyes hallowed out from years of reading microfiches and medieval script, their voices hoarse from gabbing to themselves over tinned beans and Bovril in unheated Rooms, were now being stroked and feted and fed. They were like feral cats being tickled behind the ears for the first time. They were purring, though still looking around anxiously for the next boot in the rear, the next nasty review by a rival in the Times literary supplement.

Or his claims that "in everyday life," Lillian Hellman,

was an appalling person...She would pick a fight with other customers in a store. The New York State Theater had no central aisle, and to get to the best seats one had to slide past a line of seated people. One night...Hellman had deliberately aimed her high heel and stabbed the foot of a seated woman, a complete stranger, then cursed her out for howling in pain.

As these passages demonstrate, White's prose can be side-splitting and stunning. You don't have to be gay to enjoy these White-bred reflections.

He's candid about his travails as an aspiring writer and modest about his role as a founding father of gay consciousness. But, like his more contemporary contemporaries, he doesn't always look straight at the camera, shifting in an augenblick from a deeply moving personal story to the more comfortable realm of the joke, the poke, and the coke.

And this territory comes with bouts of mean-spiritedness, including acid-strewn portraits of Sontag and Harold Brodkey, in which the author seems to play into "catty" gay stereotypes. Equally important, a sort of sadness sustained by the specter of AIDS looms over City Boy. In the end, the book drips with the world-weariness of a queen who fears he may be approaching his last outing, but who just may take the mouse in his hand again.